# CONCLUSION

## Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control: Implications for the United States Air Force

*James M. Smith*[1]

This book represents the results of a unique and valuable exercise for the United States government. Rather than reacting to a problem or policy initiative, as is usually the case in Washington, the conference upon which this book is based was held in response to a series of "what if" questions regarding the future of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW). The result is a range and depth of thinking not often encountered in the "in-box driven" security policy community in and around the government. The ideas and options developed here are, by definition, "out of the box," as no formal set of policy parameters has yet defined what it is that constitutes NSNW arms control. Thus, the work represents a degree of reflection and examination truly rare in security policy formulation. The sponsors and participants in this effort deserve great credit for taking the time and trouble to encourage and to structure this look ahead into the myriad possibilities for the future of non-strategic nuclear weapons.

### NSNW and Arms Control

The book presents both reflective and prospective thinking on non-strategic nuclear weapons and their control, whether through formal arms control mechanisms or by other means. That effort has addressed the issues revolving around defining this category of weapons and framing their control as a policy issue. It has then sought to navigate the shoals of United States, allied, and Russian objectives—objectives often at odds with each other—that would establish the foundation for any weapons control effort or process. It examines many of the obstacles standing before such efforts. And it presents contending visions for the optimal path that United States policy should take in

confronting—or choosing not to confront—this arena of arms reduction or control.

Defining the non-strategic nuclear weapons issue area and framing it within the context of arms control is the first-order priority for any approach to this topic. Definitions must be addressed first because the definition categorizes the issue into the existing arms control framework, or creates a new adjunct framework within which it will be addressed. This bounds the scope of the process and delimits the possible solution set. In short, the definition elevates some options to the top of the pile while at the same time eliminating others from even being considered as viable possibilities. All subsequent discussion of objectives and obstacles, of potential or preferred solution sets, rests on how we categorize and approach the issue.

The definition problem is particularly significant with NSNW, for as the discussion in Part I of this book describes, there exists no consensus as to even what to call this category of weapons, let alone how to characterize them within any existing arms control framework. Are they battlefield, sub-strategic, non-strategic, intermediate-range, tactical, or theater weapons? Do we define them by yield, range, target sets, or ownership? Are they in fact qualitatively distinct today from what we have traditionally considered "strategic" nuclear weapons? We must decide what we are dealing with before we can formulate a policy approach to addressing the issue. The discussion in this book has not "solved" the definition problem. Rather, it has highlighted its importance while addressing the possibilities and their implications in detail, presenting a comprehensive overview of the first step that must be taken in any attempt to address formal or informal NSNW controls.

Closely linked to defining NSNW as an arms control issue is the question of the United States' national objectives for NSNW. What corresponding objectives would be appropriate within an arms control context? If arms control is at essence an exercise in diplomacy aimed at enhancing national security, then it is crucial to specify the role that non-strategic nuclear weapons play—now and into at least the near-term future—in military efforts to

ensure America's security. Only then can one focus and formulate an appropriate approach to replace the weapons as security guarantors of those objectives, and determine an appropriate process to provide acceptable verification of compliance by all who affect those objectives. Here again this book, through the discussions in Part II, has explored the range of objectives and issues involved in setting NSNW within both the U.S. national security and international arms control contexts. The discussion has ranged from the national role of NSNW to a review of their role within the context of the NATO alliance and theater security. It has also addressed these weapons as a particularly difficult issue in U.S.-Russian relations, and it has considered the special role NSNW could play in regional counterforce options against states and non-state actors holding weapons of mass destruction. This set of national security roles and their associated objectives poses a broad and difficult agenda for framing any tailored approach to an NSNW arms control effort capable of ensuring adequate security across this entire range. In examining the question of objectives with this wider lens, this book has highlighted the full extent of the task at hand rather than simply zero in on one smaller set of finite options or recommendations.

The wide scope of objectives that are indicated for NSNW, and any viable effort to incorporate them into the arms control framework, points immediately to a number of significant obstacles that sit in the path of that effort. The discussion in Part III provides an excellent overview of how the problems of definitions and objectives make the determination of counting rules and verification—always the difficult but essential heart of effective arms controls—even more important and vexing. The discussion indicates that there is not one apparent agenda for the effort, but multiple and seemingly incompatible approaches. It highlights the added complexity created by the divergence of perspectives and objectives that the United States, its NATO allies, Russia, and China bring to the table. NSNW must be placed fully within national, alliance, bilateral, and multilateral contexts if they are to be fully addressed in relation to U.S. national security and arms control. Navigating through the cross-currents of these varied agendas and positions will pose

perhaps insurmountable problems for a traditional arms control process, necessitating innovative approaches to NSNW.

Thus, Part IV's discussion of "solutions" to the NSNW issue is as much a debate over varied interpretations of definitions and objectives, and of diverse approaches to apparent obstacles, as it is a detailed specification of options and recommendations. The positions presented vary from writing off NSNW as a non-issue for arms control, to elevating it high on the agenda for real-time attention and resolution. Here again, given this unique opportunity to forecast policy actions rather than simply react to time-constrained tasking, the true value of the discussion reflects that variety of perspectives. Future arms control efforts—or decisions specifically not to undertake such efforts—will be much more informed after reading the arguments and convictions presented here. Perhaps the most immediate value of this discussion of solutions is the range of suggestions for substantive steps that can and should be initiated now, either to prepare the ground for future arms control or to better manage this class of weapons in the continuing absence of arms control. This last point is even more salient given the consensus of most of this book's authors that the prospects for NSNW arms control in the near term are not particularly high. For the reasons they have presented, and for the many problems they have identified as yet to be resolved, NSNW arms control is perhaps not yet ready for formal interstate negotiations.

This book, then, has presented a detailed and wide-ranging analysis of NSNW and of the prospects and problems to be expected in addressing such weapons within traditional and non-traditional arms control contexts. Its biggest contribution has been to capitalize on the luxury of foresight to define the many pieces that must fit together to develop a meaningful vision of national security via arms control in the arena within which NSNW apply. Given that the departure point for this analysis has been from a decidedly macro-policy level and the perspective of the United States government, however, one more step remains. That step is to take the excellent ideas and analysis from Parts I through IV down one level; to address their

implications at the operational level of the United States Air Force.

**NSNW and the U.S. Air Force: Operational Factors and Implications**

Why focus on the United States Air Force (USAF)? At a recent workshop seeking to define and implement some systematic assessment mechanisms to better rationalize Department of Defense (DoD) arms control decisions, a senior USAF officer long involved in nuclear strategy and arms control stated "If we do what is best for United States national security, the Air Force will be OK." While his statement directly addressed strategic nuclear strategy and arms control, it holds for non-strategic nuclear weapons and controls, as well. Regarding NSNW, however, we need to stand his statement on its head. For NSNW, the USAF must take the lead in acting in the best interest of the nation—and it must do so in the absence of clear articulation of national positions and priorities until definitive guidance is issued. Why specifically, must the Air Force take charge? Simply because it is the military service that maintains these weapons, and the service that would be tasked to employ the great majority of the nation's NSNW arsenal. Without firm decisions on the long-term disposition of these weapons, the USAF is the only possible advocate to ensure the safety, security, and operational viability of this category of weapons. The answer to the question "Why the USAF?" is quite simple: If not the Air Force, who else?

How, then, do we address NSNW from an Air Force perspective? We suggest that we first define and frame this category of weapons within their operational context, addressing their roles and the operational objectives for their maintenance and potential employment. This should be done from both a DoD and USAF perspective. Against that background we can then suggest some short-, mid-, and long-term issues that the US Air Force can and should address to best prepare for future tasking for NSNW sustainment, or for USAF involvement in a future NSNW arms control effort. Just as this book's forward look has helped prepare the United States government for future

actions to address NSNW, it has also provided a "heads-up" that the USAF should seize upon in order to best prepare for its part in that future.

*Operational Context*

A first step in setting the operational context of NSNW is to recognize that these weapons have both operational and political utility, and that these two dimensions are inseparable in defining and framing any approach to their continued sustainment or their eventual withdrawal. Thus, while the Air Force is charged only with the operational side of the equation, it needs to remember that every operational decision and action will have political implications. USAF policy makers must balance operational imperatives within political realities, and they must advocate their operational decisions within a larger interagency forum. The Air Force must be fully cognizant and engaged if it is to be successful in effectively sustaining and operationalizing this category of weapons. This is a tall order if the service identifies itself as simply the "last resort" caretaker of NSNW. It must understand and embrace these weapons and their mission in order to perform effective advocacy of a national asset until such time as national decisionmakers determine some other disposition for these weapons.

Understanding the continuing "utility" of these weapons is a prerequisite to effective advocacy, and that utility lies in the multiple deterrent functions those weapons provide. NSNW contribute to deterrence in three primary ways. First, they are a central component of NATO's deterrence and defense plans for Western Europe. While this role has recently fallen to a much lower tier in NATO thinking and planning, it remains (at least on paper) as a key mission for the Alliance. Today, following the release of Russia's 1999 military doctrine and subsequent exercises in which that doctrine's tenet of early use of NSNW in regional conflicts has been tested, the NATO theater role for NSNW must be re-emphasized. For Russia today (and for the near-term future) nuclear weapons—particularly NSNW, of which Russia inherited a vast Soviet inventory—are the "poor man's substitute" for modern and effective conventional forces. The continuing utility of a viable NATO nuclear capability as a

deterrent, particularly given today's precision conventional capabilities, must be addressed. Of course, the political/military coupling within the NATO alliance between the United States and its European allies will be an important factor in determining if there are to be any changes to NATO's traditional theater NSNW role. The U.S. Air Force must continue to be a strong voice in determining and refining operational requirements in Europe.

The theater deterrence role in NATO is mirrored in other theaters, particularly the Central Command (CENTCOM) and Pacific Command areas of responsibility. NSNW and their deterrent effects would seem to have continuing relevance in regional defense and security planning for each of those regions. Not only do they play a role in general conflict deterrence and in planning for the most serious theater contingencies, but they also have a distinct role in counterforce planning to deter weapons of mass destruction (WMD) attacks on United States or coalition forces in the theater. WMD deterrence and potential force protection employment are significant modern additions to the traditional range of NSNW "utility."

Providing the foundation for credible and effective deterrence in each of these three dimensions requires the Air Force to maintain a safe, secure, and reliable NSNW stockpile; to clearly plan, train, and exercise its use in these tailored and limited roles; and to demonstrate the capability and resolve to rapidly deploy and employ these weapons if necessary. Forward basing is both a tangible and significant signal of that capability and resolve, and NATO forward basing serves both the NATO and Middle East theaters in this regard. Forward basing requires a combination of economic, operational, and political commitment, and the Air Force must be an active player in crafting that commitment by establishing the operational foundation upon which political decisions will be made. Therefore, the Air Force needs to formulate an action plan to sustain its NSNW stockpile and basing arrangements, and to enhance NSNW operational deterrent effects through deliberate, semi-transparent planning and exercises, while at the same time developing contingency

plans for unilateral or formalized controls. Some suggestions for that effort follow.

*Short-Term: Sustainment, Planning, and Advocacy*

The first imperative in any USAF action plan must be the sustainment of the weapons and the capability they represent. Sustainment includes maintaining and securing the existing stockpile of NSNW, but it also implies continued simulation and testing—within prescribed limits—as well as planning for refurbishment and replacement via improved design and technological advancement. This effort has high costs both in terms of monetary commitment and human investment. It requires a significant physical infrastructure, extensive training investments, dedicated research and development efforts and facilities, and large security forces. In addition, there are indirect "costs" in terms of the institutional USAF commitment—in tangible form—to the men and women investing their careers in the nuclear components of the force. They cannot be forgotten or marginalized, but must be rewarded and valued for their continuing contributions to the service. All of this broad sustainment effort is imperative since the credibility of the force and its resultant deterrent effect is anchored in a reliable, believable capability.

A second short-term requirement for the Air Force is realistic and semi-transparent planning and exercises. Planning need not be so detailed as to rival the Single Integrated Operations Plan of the Cold War strategic nuclear force, but it should include clear roles and at least notional, categorical designation of appropriate target types for theater and counterforce applications. These plans must also be tested via realistic operational training and exercises to fulfill the capability and multiply the deterrent effect conveyed to potential adversaries. At best, these exercises would include both intra- and interservice dimensions to clearly signal national support for USAF efforts, as well as to familiarize the other services with the Air Force's capabilities and operational options.

The success of these short-term efforts, again, depends on USAF advocacy for NSNW—not championing their use, but advocacy

in the legal sense: ensuring full, fair, and equitable accounting and consideration of these weapons and their operationalization in the DoD's planning and resourcing processes. The US Air Force is obviously the default advocate here—and perhaps not by choice. But it is the primary stakeholder and must accept its institutional responsibility to the Defense Department, the nation, and its allies and coalition partners. The Air Force must argue on behalf of this arm of deterrence unless and until a viable non-nuclear alternative is fielded.

*Mid-Term: Preparation for a Potential Drawdown in NATO*
Earlier authors in this book have highlighted the political and operational roles that NSNW play within the NATO alliance. The Air Force, fully cognizant of the arguments that favor continuing NATO deployment of these weapons, and of the forward basing implications beyond NATO, must still be prepared for the eventuality of a political decision to draw down or withdraw weapons from the NATO deployment. The USAF action plan must include quiet yet deliberate planning for withdrawal, as well as drawdown planning as an alternative to complete withdrawal. This planning should establish a minimum number of weapons that could be sustained given realistic manning and infrastructure requirements at any one location, as well as a minimum number of weapons required to fulfill immediate taskings for theater engagement plans. These minimums would be very important to contingency planning for partial withdrawal. The planning must also incorporate realistic options and timelines for introducing conventional precision-guided weapons capable of substituting for some or all of the operational roles envisioned for NSNW. This is particularly true in regional counterforce and WMD deterrence roles outside of NATO.

This planning requires very careful advocacy and contingency considerations, particularly given the political sensitivity of NSNW among some members of NATO. There can be no appearance of a decreasing U.S. Air Force or United States commitment to the NSNW force until plans are made and political decisions are finalized. For at least the mid-term, and perhaps for a long-term continuing future, full sustainment and

credible, reliable operational planning within NATO remain essential.

*Long-Term: Preparation for Formal Arms Control Initiatives*
Finally, while most authors in this book see the prospects for traditional arms control of NSNW on the horizon as slim, the US Air Force must begin to prepare for at least the active discussion and consideration of that eventuality. It must also include a realistic assessment and prepare for non-traditional arms controls in the form of multilateral, unilateral, and/or cooperative efforts. This preparation should fully address the variety of definitional options and their associated counting rules to flesh out the issues and complexities these would raise, particularly with regard to any verification regimes or mechanisms under consideration. Many of the definitions and counting rules discussed here and elsewhere could have unintended consequences for other weapons systems and USAF capabilities, and those considerations must be addressed before final plans are implemented. This will require careful advocacy within DoD to ensure that the Air Force's concerns are raised in the interagency process prior to the final determination of United States negotiating positions or unilateral initiatives.

**A Challenge to the U.S. Air Force**

The charge to the US Air Force, then, is to accept the role of NSNW advocate within the Department of Defense, and to adopt an action plan toward short-term sustainment, planning, and informed advocacy. It extends to include mid-term planning for the possible drawdown or elimination of NSNW currently forward-based in NATO, with special attention to the incorporation of conventional capabilities to replace traditional reliance on NSNW. This portion of the action plan is particularly sensitive due to the political dimension of the NATO NSNW presence. And the Air Force's action plan must also look to the long-term possibility of either traditional or non-traditional arms control applied to this category of weapons. Great care is needed here to ensure a full examination and vetting of all primary and secondary effects of such controls, not only to NSNW, but also to other systems and capabilities. This

is a plan involving actions that the USAF might not seek on its own, but these actions are essential to the security of the nation and to ensure America's ability to fulfill its commitments to allies and partners. These actions fall to the US Air Force as holder of the great majority of these weapons and responsibility for the lion's share of the NSNW stockpile's safety, security, reliability, and credibility. The USAF should step up to its responsibilities by design, not just by default.

The unprecedented end of a half-century of nuclear-based deterrence has opened many doors and raised many expectations for the deliberate reduction in the scores of nuclear weapons that simultaneously protect and threaten our planet. The prospect for the denuclearization of national security, or at least for significant steps down that path, is perhaps most attractive to those of us who have come to know those weapons "up close and personal." We in the United States military, and particularly in the United States Air Force, have the most deep-seated appreciation for nuclear weapons, both strategic and non-strategic, and hold the highest stakes in their disposition. It is directly incumbent upon us to prepare fully and intelligently for their continued sustainment, operational deployment, possible employment, and eventual withdrawal from active service, all under well-constructed control provisions. Today the Air Force has the unprecedented luxury of time to think, plan, and act in a deliberate manner to ensure survival and security in alternative futures with or without non-strategic nuclear weapons. It owes it to the nation to seize that opportunity and make the best of it. This book offers an exceptional series of thoughtful analyses upon which to launch that effort. It is now up to each of us to follow through and act upon this foundation.

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**Endnotes**

[1] The views expressed in this chapter are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect the official views or positions of the United States Air Force, the U.S. Government, or any government agency.